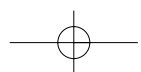
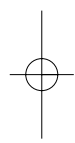
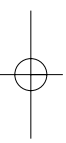
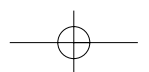
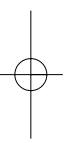




# Part I

## Concepts





# 1

## Introduction to Oppression and Anti-oppression

### **Aim**

- To present a picture of the general nature of discrimination and oppression.
- To illustrate their seriousness and pervasiveness, throughout the world and throughout history.
- To present examples and frameworks for understanding oppression.
- To signpost positive thinking as an approach to anti-oppression.

Human societies all over the world, and at all times in history, have been very sensitive to differences – differences of gender, skin colour, size, strength, ability, place of origin, language, religion, political allegiance and so on. This has combined with a strong sense of ‘belongingness’ – defining Self and Other – and the possession of power, giving control over ‘The Other’. The result has been stratification both within and between societies, with subjugation of the weak by the powerful, often by violent means. Philosophy, religion, art, science and wealth (what we might call ‘civilisation’) have served to some extent to culturalise and socialise people into more peaceful and tolerant lifestyles, yet this has been accompanied by ever more sophisticated means of exerting power over others. Human divisions are today as prevalent and powerful as ever. The gap between rich and poor in the world is ever widening. Wars and genocides are as frequent as ever.

## Concepts

### Discrimination and oppression

The experience of those against whom power is exercised is often one of being discriminated against and oppressed. In this book we draw a distinction between discrimination and oppression. Discrimination relates to inequality and unfairness. Power is exerted over those who are seen as different in such a way that less opportunities, less resources, less protection and fewer rights are available to them than to more powerful or higher status groups. Oppression goes even beyond this, to involve a lower evaluation of the worth of individuals or groups, a rejection of them, exclusion from valued social roles, and even a denial of their existence or right to exist.

Discrimination and oppression are associated with a number of traits of human beings towards those they perceive as different. There may be prejudice – negative beliefs about people, often based on stereotypes and myths, and certainly based on lack of understanding and empathy. There may be devaluation – beliefs and actions that reflect a lower valuation of an individual or group: a valuation as of less worth, less significance, less importance, of people to whom all sorts of things can be done that would not be acceptable to oneself. There may be neglect – deliberate or unintended – resulting in negative experiences and risk of harm to health, welfare and even life. There may be ignorance – through lack of interest, lack of effort, or simply lack of information – resulting in damaging or upsetting behaviour towards others, however unintended. And there may be perpetuation of inequality – due to self-interest, lack of motivation for justice, or feelings of powerlessness. Such human traits as these are likely to operate in combination, making the tackling of discrimination and oppression a very difficult task.

### Ignorance and prejudice

An example of a combination of prejudice, devaluation and ignorance is illustrated by this quotation from the 1908 edition of *Chambers Encyclopaedia*, under the heading of ‘Negroes’:

The disposition of the Negro is usually pacific and cheerful. He is not easily depressed by poverty or thoughts of the future. Content that his immediate wants are provided for, he rarely prepares for a distant contingency. Eminently gregarious in his instincts, he is usually to be found in certain streets and quarters of the town exclusively occupied by members of his own race. His interest in the past is weak, and few or no reminiscences of his ancestral languages, traditions, superstitions or usages have been retained. His religion is emotional and exerts but a moderate influence on his morality . . .

Story-telling, singing and music are favourite diversions of the coloured population . . . They produce music of pleasant though not artistic character. No Negro composer . . . has attained celebrity. Their songs are . . . generally defective in prosody and without merit, being often little more than words strung together to carry an air . . .

## Introduction to oppression and anti-oppression

The Negro is . . . unwilling to make the necessary mental effort to obtain [education] . . . [After puberty] there supervenes a visible ascendancy of the appetites and emotions over the intellect, and an increasing indisposition to mental labour . . . It is a rare exception for one of them to undertake the studies requisite for a profession; and when one does, he is content with what is barely sufficient for its remunerative practice . . .

Many thoughtful and learned men see in the increasing coloured population a standing menace to the institutions and culture of their country.

Given the same level of prejudice, devaluation and ignorance in relation to women (reflected, for example, in the male-oriented language in the above quotation), we can appreciate the struggle to overcome discrimination and oppression of someone like Condoleezza Rice, currently US Secretary of State, and her ancestors.

Condoleezza Rice was born into a 'negro' (it would now be called 'African-American') family in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1954. Her father, and her grandfather before him, were Presbyterian Church ministers. They lived in a middle class, though predominantly Black, area of town. Condoleezza attended a segregated school for Black children only. She had plenty of experience of discrimination and oppression. In 1963 one of her closest friends was killed when white racists bombed a Baptist Church Sunday School for Black children. Her parents were strong believers in the value of education, and Condoleezza was brought up under their belief that white supremacy could only be overcome by Black people being 'twice as good'. Condoleezza excelled at languages and music. Her family moved to Denver, Colorado, in 1967 and Condoleezza attended a Catholic girl's school. At age 15 she enrolled in a music college with a view to becoming a concert pianist (she still gives occasional piano concerts). Not believing she was good enough to earn a living through music, she attended Denver University to study political science. She proved academically extremely able, obtaining her Bachelor's degree at age 19, her Master's degree at age 20, and a PhD at age 26. She specialised in international affairs and became fluent in Russian, as well as being able to communicate well in German, French and Spanish. She was appointed to an academic post at Stanford University, rising to Professor of Political Science and Provost (senior academic officer) of the University. In 1990 she was appointed principal adviser on the Soviet Union to President George Bush Senior. In 2000, she was appointed National Security Adviser by President George W. Bush, and in 2005 became US Secretary of State. (Biographical information from [www.answers.com/topic/condoleezza-rice](http://www.answers.com/topic/condoleezza-rice).)

### Bias in history

One phenomenon that perpetuates prejudice and ignorance is the writing and teaching of history from a particular perspective. History is likely to be

## Concepts

written and taught from the perspective of the dominant culture of the writer or teacher. Thus, for example, European history recounts the world explorations of Europeans: Cook, Columbus, Cabot, Marco Polo. This perspective is often called Eurocentric; it sees Europe as the central, dominant culture in the world. Unlikely in European historical accounts, at least until recent attempts to present global perspectives, are description of world explorations by Africans (Karenga, 1993) or the Chinese (Menziés, 2002), for example. The tendency of different cultures to see themselves as the most important is reflected in geographical names: the term 'Mediterranean' means 'centre of the world', as does the word 'China' ('Zhonghua' in Chinese, meaning 'central country').

The telling of history from a particular dominant cultural perspective renders the contribution of people from other cultures invisible. We will give two examples of this, both involving the relegation of Black people to a lesser role than they deserve in accounts from a Eurocentric perspective.

### Mary Seacole

Many British accounts of the early development of modern nursing practices derived from experience in the Crimean War place emphasis, usually sole emphasis, on the role of Florence Nightingale. Often omitted from mention is the equally valuable contribution in that context of a Black woman nurse, Mary Seacole.

Mary was born in Jamaica in 1805. Her mother ran a boarding house for injured soldiers, and taught Mary her basic nursing skills. Mary travelled widely to complement this knowledge, including visits to Britain. On one of these visits, in 1854, she asked the War Office if she could be sent as an army nurse to the Crimea so that she could work with wounded soldiers. This request was refused, but Mary financed her own travel to the Crimea where she established a 'British Hotel' providing accommodation for injured officers. From this base she would travel to the battlefield to tend to individual wounded soldiers on the spot. Amongst the fighting men she became as well known and respected as Florence Nightingale. Her reputation followed her on her return to Britain, and in 1857 a festival was held in her honour at which thousands of people contributed to a fund to support her. (Information from [www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/seacole\\_mary.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/seacole_mary.shtml). See also Robinson, 2005.)

Mary wrote an account of her life, recently re-published by Penguin (Seacole, 2005), though she still does not achieve the prominence of Florence Nightingale in accounts of nursing in the Crimean War. However, there is a Mary Seacole Centre for Nursing Practice at Thames Valley University, founded in 1998 by Professor Elizabeth Anionwu. She named it after Mary Seacole 'as so few people seemed to have heard about this

## Introduction to oppression and anti-oppression

amazing Jamaican woman and her enormous contributions to nursing soldiers in the Crimean war' ([www.maryseacole.com](http://www.maryseacole.com)).

The focus of the Centre is 'to enable the integration of a multi-ethnic philosophy into the process of nursing and midwifery recruitment, education, practice, management and research.'

### Exercise

Have you ever heard of Mary Seacole? Find out about her life and contribution through the Internet, libraries or other sources.

### The British slave trade

In 2007 Britain celebrated the 200th anniversary of the passing in Parliament of a Bill to end the British slave trade. William Wilberforce had given a speech in the House of Commons in 1789 which lasted four hours, passionately arguing the case for the abolition of the slave trade. It took him another 18 years to gain enough support for the Bill to be passed. There is no doubt that Wilberforce was the leader of the movement to achieve this, and that his actions were the most powerful and effective. He is certainly appreciated amongst Black people. There is a Wilberforce University for Black students in America, and a Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation, based in Hull, whose patron is Archbishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa. However, the story is often told as if Black people, whether free or slaves or ex-slaves, played no significant role. Melvyn Bragg, for example, draws attention only to white British contributors to the anti-slavery movement:

Elizabeth I had said that the slave trade would 'call down the vengeance of heaven', and there was a strain in English life and thought which was opposed to the slave trade from Elizabeth up to contemporaries of Wilberforce. William Paley, for instance, rejected slavery in his book *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*. Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*, condemned slavery for rather different reasons, as an inefficient system of production, as slaves had no prospect of owning property and were promised no incentive to work. (Bragg, 2006: 158)

Krise (1999) assembled an anthology of literature from the West Indies written between 1657 and 1777. This includes several anti-slavery pieces by Black writers, for example *A Speech Made by a Black of Guadeloupe* (1700) and *The Speech of Moses Bon Saam* (1735). Carretta (1996) similarly edited a collection of writings by Black authors in the 18th century. These include: *Narrative on the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton*

## Concepts

*Hammon, a Negro Man; Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great Britain by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa; and The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, the African, Written by Himself.* Thus we can see that behind the movement to abolish the British slave trade were many contributions by Black people.

Wilberforce was the spokesperson in Parliament for the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, founded in 1787. A prominent member of this Society was a Black ex-slave, Olaudah Equiano, whose book *The Interesting Narrative* was published in 1789, the same year as Wilberforce's speech. The book is re-published by Penguin (Equiano, 2003). Equiano was kidnapped from Nigeria at age 11 and taken as a slave to Barbados. He was allowed by one of his various owners to trade and earn money, and he eventually saved enough to buy his freedom. He became a merchant seaman, based in London. He was active in the movement to abolish the slave trade, and after his book was published he travelled all over Britain talking about his experiences as a slave. His book was re-issued in nine editions between 1789 and 1794 and sold so many copies that it made Equiano a wealthy man. It had a major influence on the eventual abolition of the slave trade, but this is seldom mentioned in accounts of that achievement. For a biography of Equiano see Carretta (2007). There is an Equiano Society, formed in London in 1996, which aims to publicise and celebrate the achievements of Equiano and his other Black contemporaries.

Equiano particularly argued an economic case for the abolition of slavery, believing that the opening up of direct trade in manufactured goods with Africa would be much more lucrative than the subsidised plantations utilising slave labour in the Caribbean. He wrote:

The abolition of slavery would be in reality a universal good . . . Tortures, murder and every other imaginable barbarity and iniquity are practised upon the poor slaves with impunity. I hope the slave-trade will be abolished. I pray it may be an event at hand. The great body of manufacturers, uniting in the cause, will considerably facilitate and expedite it; and, as I have already stated, it is most substantially their interest and advantage, and as such the nation's at large (except those persons concerned in the manufacturing of neck-yokes, collars, chains, handcuffs, leg-bolts, drags, thumb screws, iron-muzzles, coffins, cats, scourges and other instruments of torture used in the slave trade). In a short time one sentiment alone will prevail, from motives of interest as well as justice and humanity. (Equiano, 2003: 234)

A rather different kind of influence on the abolition of the slave trade was rebellion by slaves themselves. Slaves were not all passive and resigned to their fate. Many rebelled against individual slave owners, and many escaped, resulting in some organised rebellions against slavery. Escaped slaves in the Caribbean were known as 'Maroons'. They set up several communities in places where discovery and attack were difficult. One such community was known as 'Nanny Town', situated in the Blue Mountains in Jamaica.



## Introduction to oppression and anti-oppression

Its name derives from the fact that its leader was a woman, known as 'Nanny Maroon'. After escaping from slavery on a sugar plantation with her five brothers, Nanny organised the Blue Mountains community of Maroons. In the 1720s and 1730s, she led raids to free more slaves, and is said to have helped over 800 slaves to escape. Nanny Town was constantly attacked by British troops, but because of its location and the skill of the Maroons in resistance, the community survived, eventually being granted the right to their land and their freedom. Nanny acted as spiritual leader to the community and used an extensive knowledge of herbs to maintain the community's health. It is said that she organised the community along the lines of an Ashanti tribe in Africa. She was killed in a British attack on the community in the 1730s. Today, Nanny Maroon is regarded as a heroine of the struggle against slavery; her portrait is on the 500 Jamaican dollar bill (Gottlieb, 2000; see also [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nanny\\_Maroon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nanny_Maroon)).

The fact of slave rebellions and the difficulty of destroying Maroon communities such as Nanny Town were additional factors in convincing Britain to abolish the slave trade.

Of course, in celebrating particular acts of abolition of slave trading, we should not be complacent in thinking that slavery has been abolished altogether. Baroness Caroline Cox in Britain has been an outspoken leader of campaigns against slavery in the present day. Her recent book *This Immoral Trade* contains detailed studies of slavery in Sudan, Uganda and Burma. The introduction to the book states:

Slavery remains rampant worldwide, despite the celebrations surrounding the bicentenary of its abolition in Britain. At least 27 million men, women and children are enslaved today, ranging from prostitutes in London to indentured workers in Burma. (Cox and Marks, 2006: 1)

### Exercise

Through the Internet, libraries or other resources, find out more about the lives and achievements of Olaudah Equiano and Nanny Maroon.

## Oppression throughout history

One of the longest-standing historical (and current) examples of oppression through prejudice is that of Jewish people. Jews form less than 1 per cent of British society (less than half a million people), but discrimination and oppression against them is common, despite the major contribution they make to British business, social and cultural life. Indeed, it is so common that much of it goes unreported in the news media.

## Concepts

The *London Evening Standard* for 21 June 2004 reported that in the previous four years over 100 synagogues in Britain had been desecrated by vandals. Typical were these incidents:

- In June 2004 a window of the South Tottenham Synagogue in London was smashed and burning rags were thrown inside. A large number of books were destroyed, including prayer books over 100 years old that had been smuggled out of Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Rabbi Michael Biberfeld said that some of the books were priceless, having been out of print since the war. He said: 'The people who saved them from the Nazis in 1938 risked their lives. For them to be destroyed is a tragic end.' Among the burnt books was a signed copy of a six-volume set of the Mishna Berura, a code of Jewish law written over 100 years ago. 'It was a very important devotional piece,' said Rabbi Biberfeld.
- The following day, there was another arson attack on the UK headquarters of the Jewish educational body Aish Ha Torah in Hendon, London. The synagogue and offices were destroyed, causing £250,000 of damage. Again, many books and manuscripts were lost, including the life's work of several scholars and Rabbis based at the centre. Two handwritten scrolls of the Torah were ripped and desecrated. Rabbi Naftali Schiff, director of the Hendon centre, said: 'The desecration of Kristallnacht in 1938 is imprinted on the Jewish psyche of my generation, and seeing scrolls of the law torn and lying on the floor of my own synagogue in London is devastating. This mindless act of hatred and destruction rings yet another warning bell across the country to men and women of reason, tolerance and mutual respect to join together to ensure the flames of extremism and intolerance are not allowed to engulf these shores.' (Information from Hopkirk, 2004)

'Kristallnacht', or the Night of Broken Glass, refers to events on the night of 9 November 1938. Rampaging mobs throughout Germany and the newly acquired territories of Austria and Sudetenland freely attacked Jews in the street, in their homes and at their places of work and worship. At least 96 Jews were killed and hundreds more injured, more than 1,000 synagogues were burned (and possibly as many as 2,000), almost 7,500 Jewish businesses were destroyed, cemeteries and schools were vandalised, and 30,000 Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Immediately afterwards the Nazi government passed a law confiscating all insurance monies due for the damage caused. (Information from <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/kristallnacht.html>.)

Six million Jews were murdered by the Nazis during the Second World War, in labour camps like Auschwitz, in special death camps like Sobibor and Treblinka, and in their homes by special army battalions called Einsatzgruppen. Prior to this mass killing, Jews had been herded into huge ghettos: the Warsaw ghetto held almost half a million Jews, the Lodz ghetto 200,000. In a trial in Germany in 1970, Franz Stangl, Commandant of the Treblinka death camp in 1942 and 1943, was convicted of overseeing the deaths of 900,000 people.

Reading the history of the Jewish people, however, shows that nothing Hitler did had not been done before (Johnson, 1987; Ausubel, 1984).

## Introduction to oppression and anti-oppression

During the early part of their 3,000-year history, the Jews were a close-knit people who largely kept themselves to themselves, giving rise to the first expressions by others of anti-semitism. There is a record by a Greek writer around 300 BC (non-Christians may prefer the terms BCE – Before the Common Era – and CE – Common Era – rather than BC and AD) describing Jews as ‘inhospitable and anti-human’. In 133 BC, another declared that Jews should be annihilated because they were the only people on earth who refused to associate with the rest of humanity. In 63 BC the Romans captured Jerusalem and Jews lived under Roman rule for the next century. In 19 AD, the Roman Emperor Tiberius expelled all Jews from Rome. In 66 AD there was an uprising of Jews in Jerusalem against the repression of the Romans. The Romans completely destroyed Jerusalem. The Roman historian Tacitus recorded that 600,000 Jews were killed and over 500,000 captured and taken to Rome as slaves.

In 130 AD, Emperor Hadrian decreed the banning of circumcision and the teaching of the Jewish holy text, the Torah. This led to a further rebellion of Jews, resulting in a four-year civil war in which 580,000 Jews were killed. One historical account talks of ‘the blood of murdered women and children flowing for a mile like a turgid stream into the nearby sea.’ (quoted by Ausubel, 1984: 90)

Such events increased the process of dispersal of Jews to other parts of the world, but as Christianity spread, the Jews often became scapegoats for the ills of the societies in which they settled. For example, despite the major contribution of Jews to the establishment of the Moorish occupation of Spain between 800 and 1400 AD as one of the most advanced civilisations in the world, the defeat of the Moors and the ensuing inquisition led to widespread massacre of Jews and their expulsion from Spain (Perez, 2004). Even earlier, the 16,000 Jews living in England were expelled by Edward I in 1290 AD, and they were not allowed back until the time of Cromwell, 1656. Jews were banned from England for over 350 years.

In Germany, Jews were blamed for the Black Death in 1348 and almost all Jews in Germany were killed or fled east to Poland. They gradually returned but were subject to great prejudice. In 1543, Martin Luther published a pamphlet called ‘On the Jews and Their Lies’ in which he urged: ‘their synagogues should be set on fire, and whatever is left should be buried in dirt so that no one may ever be able to see a stone or cinder of it.’ (quoted by Johnson, 1987: 242)

He described Jews as ‘poisonous envenomed worms’. In 1573 the Lutherans finally got their way, and Jews were banned from Germany altogether.

In 1516 in Italy it was decreed, not that Jews would be expelled from the country, but that they must live on an island off the coast in a Jews-only community, known as a ‘ghetto’. Within it, there were very poor living conditions, massive overcrowding, poor employment opportunities, exploitation and slavery, and curfews preventing movement both inside

## Concepts

and outside the ghetto. The basic idea was much older. Probably the first ghetto was established in Poland in 1266, where it was decreed that:

lest the Christian people be infected with the superstition and depraved morals of the Jews living among them, we command that the Jews live apart in houses next to one another in a sequestered part of the city, separated from the dwellings of Christians by a hedge, wall or ditch. (quoted by Ausubel, 1984: 134)

Jews who had returned to Germany by the early 1700s were made to wear yellow badges to identify themselves. In many European countries, Jews were subject to special taxes, to restrictions on employment and education, and to bans on them writing or speaking in Hebrew. In Austria in 1787, Jews were compelled to change their Hebrew-sounding names and to buy new names. Names that were cheap were Weiss, Schwarz, Gross, Klein. More expensive were names of flowers or precious stones: Lilienthal, Edelstein, Diamant. Very poor Jews had offensive names given to them: Eselkopf (donkey-head), Schmalz (greasy), Borgenicht (thief).

By the mid-19th century there was a large population of Jews in Russia, suffering widespread persecution. In 1881, Tzar Alexander III pushed through a government order encouraging the active killing of Jews – an activity that became known as a ‘pogrom’.

So we can see that before the advent of Nazi Germany, there were well-established historical precedents for:

- Making Jews wear badges to identify them.
- Herding Jews into ghettos.
- Using Jews as slaves.
- Active government-sponsored pogroms to kill Jews.
- Expulsion of Jews from their communities.
- Mass killing of Jews thought to be a threat.
- Destruction of synagogues.
- Banning of expression of Jewish culture and language.

The Jews, however, are survivors rather than victims. The diaspora of Jews in all the major societies of the world continues to make a considerable contribution to the wealth, culture and social life of those countries (Ausubel, 1984).

### Exercise

There are a large number of books about the Holocaust, as the murder, torture and enslavement of Jewish people in Nazi Germany is called. Try to find and read some first – hand accounts by people who survived or people who died but left records of their experience. Two collections of such accounts are Robertson (2000) and Joseph (2003), but there are many more.

## The prevalence of oppression

The Jews are but one example of oppression in operation. Indeed, the Holocaust was but one of many genocides pursued in the 20th century:

- *Turks against Armenians*: Between 1915 and 1923 over a million Armenians were killed by actions of the Ottoman government in Turkey (Dadrian, 1995).
- *Stalin against Ukrainians*: In 1932, 7 million people died in the Ukraine as a result of a famine deliberately created by the Stalin government (Mace, 1997).
- *Pakistan against Bengalis in Bangladesh*: At least 1 million people were killed by the Pakistan army in Bangladesh in 1971 after a popular uprising claiming independence; Bangladesh was formerly East Pakistan (Bhattacharyya, 1988).
- *The Khmer Rouge against Cambodians*: Over 2 million people were killed in Cambodia in 1975 by the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot (Kiernan, 1996).
- *Hutus against Tutsis in Rwanda*: Up to 1 million people were killed in just ten weeks in Rwanda in 1994 (Des Forges, 1999).

and many more continuing up to the present day. And in Nazi Germany, the Jews were not the only, nor indeed the first, group to be targeted for elimination. The gas chambers were first invented to kill large numbers of people with learning difficulties, before the technology was developed for the mass killing of Jews (Williams, 2006).

The first gas chambers were developed by doctors, nurses and technicians within institutions for people with learning difficulties in Germany and Austria. Because of their experience, some of the nurses and administrators from these hospitals were later sent to design and supervise the setting up of the gas chambers in the death camps in Eastern Poland for exterminating the Jews. For example, Michael Hermann, formerly Chief Male Nurse at Hartheim Castle, an institution for people with learning difficulties in Austria, was sent to establish and run the gas chambers at Sobibor, one of the death camps for killing Jews in German-occupied Poland.

A statistical record found after the end of the war showed that over 70,000 people with learning difficulties or neurological conditions were killed. The gas chambers, situated inside former hospitals and asylums for disabled people, were disguised as shower rooms. A perforated gas pipe, fixed at a height of about a metre, went through the room. The pipe was connected with gas containers in the room next door. Carbon monoxide entered the room through the holes in the pipe. Up to 60 people were crowded into the 14 square – metre room which was locked by steel doors. Through a control window in the wall, the doctors and administrators watched the people die. It took several minutes before they were all dead. Afterwards, a fan extracted the gas from the gas chamber.

Death certificates were issued for the families, but the data on them about cause, time and place of death were false. (Information from [www.chgs.umn.edu](http://www.chgs.umn.edu), website of the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Minnesota, USA.)

## Concepts

It is chilling to recognise that the killings were administered by doctors and nurses who had previously cared for and treated the people. Other professionals, such as social workers, actively colluded in these events or at the least made little protest about what was happening (Kunstreich, 2003).

### Contribution, survival and positive self-perception

In this book we stress the importance of studying the authentic first-hand experience of people themselves who have encountered oppression or are at risk of oppression. This is for several reasons.

First, we need to be appreciative of the efforts of people themselves to resist and overcome oppression. This helps us to see people not as helpless and needing pity, but as deserving of respect and admiration. It also avoids us giving sole credit for anti-oppressive reforms to 'rescuers' from more dominant groups, as in the example above of the abolition of the British slave trade.

As an example of self-contribution to anti-oppression, we can quote the achievements of women in the face of oppression in male-dominated society. In ancient history there are many examples of women leaders, such as Boadicea and Cleopatra. Examples in the Middle Ages would include Hildegard of Bingen and Joan of Arc. Some more recent examples of achievement include (Jackson, 2007):

- In 1883, Jane Stewart was the first woman to join the British Army (to lead a training school for army nurses).
- In 1869, Elizabeth Blackwell became the first registered woman doctor in the UK.
- In 1903, Marie Curie became the first woman recipient of the Nobel Prize.
- In 1918, the suffragette movement achieved votes for women, though still only if they were over age 30.
- In 1919, Lady Astor became the first woman MP.
- In 1928, women achieved equal voting rights with men.
- In 1929, Margaret Bondfield became the first woman government cabinet minister.
- In 1953, Vijaya Pandit became the first woman President of the UN General Assembly.
- In 1955, Barbara Mandell became the first woman news reader on television.
- In 1958, Hilda Harding became the first woman bank manager in the UK.
- In 1960, Sirimawo Bandaranaike became the world's first woman Prime Minister, in Sri Lanka.
- In 1963, Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman in space.
- In 1970, Annie Nightingale became the first woman radio DJ in Britain.
- In 1972, women were admitted to the London Stock Exchange and were able to become professional jockeys.
- In 1976, Mary Langdon became Britain's first woman firefighter.
- In 1979, Margaret Thatcher became Britain's first woman Prime Minister.
- In 1981, Baroness Young became the first woman leader of the House of Lords.
- In 1988, Elizabeth Butler-Sloss became the first woman Appeal Court Judge.

## Introduction to oppression and anti-oppression

In 1992, Betty Boothroyd became the first woman Speaker of the House of Commons. In 1994, the first woman priests were ordained in the Church of England. In 2007, MFOira Cameron became the first woman Beefeater, guarding the Tower of London.

It seems intensely patronising to list these achievements of women, as if they should surprise or amaze us! Nevertheless, each one of those listed was achieved by the efforts of women themselves in the face of male-dominated conventions and much opposition by men in power.

Second, people who have experienced oppression directly often have a more positive and helpful perception of themselves than those whose views derive from the culture that has perpetuated the oppression. We can see an example in the Black American singer and actor Paul Robeson, born in 1898. One of his most famous songs, sung in his rich deep voice, is 'Old Man River'. This song was originally written by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein as part of the musical *Show Boat*, first produced in 1927. The original lyrics depicted Black Americans as down-trodden, pathetic people:

There's an old man called the Mississippi,  
That's the old man that I'd like to be,  
What does he care if the world's got troubles?  
What does he care if the land ain't free?

You and me, we sweat and strain,  
Body all aching and racked with pain.  
'Tote that barge! Lift that bale!  
Get a little drunk and you land in jail.

I get weary and sick of trying,  
I'm tired of living and scared of dying,  
But Old Man River,  
He just keeps rolling along.

Robeson, however, changed the lyrics when he sang the song. The entry under 'Old Man River' in the Internet encyclopaedia Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org>) states:

The changes in Robeson's concert renditions of the song shift the portrayal of Joe away from a resigned and sad character who is susceptible to the forces of his world, to one who is timelessly empowered and able to persevere through even the most trying circumstances.

Here is Robeson's version of the verses above:

There's an old man called the Mississippi,  
That's the old man I *don't* like to be.

## Concepts

What does he care if the world's got troubles?  
What does he care if the land ain't free?

You and me, we sweat and strain,  
Body all aching and racked with pain.  
'Tote that barge! Lift that bale!  
You show a little grit and you land in jail.

But I keep laughing instead of crying,  
I must keep fighting until I'm a-dying,  
And Old Man River,  
He'll just keep rolling along.

### Exercise

Through the Internet, libraries or other resources, find out more about the life and achievements of Paul Robeson. If it interests you, find and listen to a recording of his singing. How do you think his singing related to his anti-oppressive beliefs?

There are examples amongst disabled people of this same process of replacing negative perceptions held by the dominant oppressive culture with positive imagery reflecting the positive characteristics and contribution of the people themselves. Judith Snow, a person with severe physical impairments, has written a paper called 'Giftedness versus Disability', contrasting her own life and needs with that of an Olympic athlete. She argues that her contribution to community can be as great, and that if she were seen as gifted instead of disabled the same level of support and resources might be provided. She concludes:

The community is denied the talents, gifts, contributions and opportunities of all the people who are excluded. The answer is simple – see me as gifted, not as disabled. Throw away the concept of disability. Welcome the concept of giftedness. (Snow, 2007)

Ronald Davis wrote a book called *The Gift of Dyslexia* in which, as a person with dyslexia himself, he argues that people with dyslexia have special talents – in thinking non-verbally, in intuition and awareness, in multidimensional thought processes, in creativity, in curiosity, and in special mastery of skills that are learned (Davis, 1997).

Resisting the perception of you by dominant culture is not easy, and it takes assertiveness and courage to proclaim your different valuation



## Introduction to oppression and anti-oppression

of yourself. Caiseal Mor (2007) writes about his autism under the title *A Blessing and a Curse*. His own view, however, is made clear:

In my humble opinion autism is a wondrous gift – a blessing of sorts. As far as I'm concerned, autistic benefits far outstrip any drawbacks you can imagine. But it's taken me a lifetime of self-examination and inquiry to arrive at that conclusion. (Mor, 2007: 9)

The relativity (or 'social construction') of perceptions of disability as necessarily negative is well brought out by Vic Finkelstein (1981). He wrote a story about a community of disabled people who used wheelchairs. Their houses had low ceilings and doors. Able-bodied people who visited or came to live there often bumped their heads and suffered with painful backache because they always had to stoop. They were prescribed helmets and body-braces by the community's doctors. They had problems gaining employment or appearing on television because they looked odd doubled-up and they had difficulty making eye contact. Charities were set up to raise money for them. Eventually they started a pressure group to improve conditions for themselves, whereupon they were said to have a chip on their shoulder and to be unable to accept and come to terms with their condition!

A third product we can derive from authentic first-hand accounts is a perception of people as survivors rather than victims. This helps us in health and social care services to see ourselves as working in partnership with people to meet their needs in an empowering and anti-oppressive way. There are many accounts of the survival of people through often extreme oppressive circumstances. Some examples are:

- Anonymous (2005) *A Woman in Berlin*  
The diary of a German woman in Berlin after its liberation by the Russian Army in 1945. Subject to great cruelty and oppression, including repeated rape, she describes her survival strategy, achieved through great courage and resilience.
- Jean-Dominique Bauby (1998) *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*  
This is an account by a disabled person severely impaired following a stroke. His body felt like a diving-bell but his mind was still like a butterfly. He dictated this book over several years by indicating words and letters by blinking one eye.
- Quentin Crisp (1996) *The Naked Civil Servant*  
The autobiography of a gay man, telling of his survival strategies during a time when he wished to proclaim his sexual orientation but when homosexual behaviour between men was illegal. He had a job as a model in an art college. The college was supported by the government and he often had to pose nude: hence he described himself as 'a naked civil servant'.
- Nelson Mandela (1994) *Long Walk to Freedom*  
The autobiography of the African National Congress leader who survived racist oppression and a long term of imprisonment to emerge as head of the post-Apartheid South African government and a highly respected international statesman.

## Concepts

- Bob Turney (1997) *I'm Still Standing*  
The remarkable story of a man who survived almost twenty years in prison, and dyslexia, to qualify as a social worker, write a book, and become a family man and an advocate for young people at risk of offending.
- Donna Williams (1998) *Nobody Nowhere*  
One of the first autobiographies of a person with autism or Asperger's syndrome, in which she describes her experiences as well as gives advice on understanding autistic people. There have since been several other autobiographies published by people with autism, including that by Mor (2007) mentioned above.

### Exercise

Find one of these books, or a similar autobiography by a person who has experienced oppression. Try to find time to read it. As you do so, make notes on what you learn about the author's strategies for survival. What can you learn about strategies for yourself to apply anti-oppressive practice?

## Levels of oppression and discrimination

Neil Thompson (1993) has provided a model of the operation of forces of discrimination and oppression at three levels. The model is known as PCS. **P** stands for the personal or psychological level. It refers to the personal interactions of people, the thoughts, beliefs and actions of individuals, and the values, stereotypes and prejudices that individuals hold about others. **C** is the cultural level, the pattern of communal values and behaviours resulting from consensus and conformity within a particular society or culture. **S** is the structural level, the way in which power and resources are used in society to maintain or tackle divisions. The **P**, **C** and **S** levels interact to maintain and influence each other.

Critiques of Thompson's model (for example Payne, 2005) have questioned the links implied by Thompson between personal actions, culture and structure. Nevertheless, it is helpful to consider oppression operating at these three levels. It can be argued that the direction of influence between the personal, cultural and structural can differ in different situations.

For example, we can examine the influence of these factors in Rwanda, leading up to the terrible genocide of people identified as Tutsi by those seeking to retain the power of those identified as Hutu (Des Forges, 1999; African Rights, 1995). There was a very tight structure of communication and command between government and people. This structure was used to distribute

## Introduction to oppression and anti-oppression

weapons to local Hutu militia groups. Propaganda by the Hutu-dominated government had begun to portray Tutsi people as a danger to Rwandan society. This was reinforced by the media, with radio broadcasts and newspapers describing Tutsis as 'cockroaches' and 'snakes'. Thus, a culture was built up of hatred and suspicion of Tutsis. The trigger for the genocide was the apparent assassination of the Rwandan president, a Hutu. Despite Hutus and Tutsis having led peaceful lives as neighbours in villages without much personal animosity, structure and culture came together to influence ordinary Hutu people to turn on their Tutsi neighbours and join in government-sponsored attacks. Almost a million people were killed in just ten weeks.

We can see here the influence of structure and culture on personal actions, but there are situations in which it might be argued that the influence is in the other direction. Initial government action to combat HIV/AIDS in Britain was to circulate every household with an alarmist leaflet warning of danger. Meanwhile there were few or no specialist structures for the prevention or treatment of HIV/AIDS. The media presented HIV/AIDS as primarily associated with gay sex. Thus, both structure and culture contained elements likely to be experienced as oppressive by people in need. It was friends and families of people with HIV/AIDS, organisations representing the gay community where HIV/AIDS was initially most prevalent, and individual advocates for people with HIV/AIDS such as Princess Diana, who took a more responsible and responsive stance and pressed for the development of specialist facilities and an end to negative and discriminatory perceptions of people with HIV/AIDS. (See the website of the Terence Higgins Trust, [www.tht.org.uk](http://www.tht.org.uk); for an account of a similar process in South Africa, see Walker, 2007.) Today we have a much more balanced and helpful perception of people with HIV/AIDS and their needs, and although discrimination and oppression are still found, they are much reduced. Specialist diagnostic, treatment and care services are more developed, and research into prevention is supported. It can be argued here that personal actions influenced culture and structure.

The useful point represented by Thompson's model is that oppression operates at different levels, and hence anti-oppression must also operate at those different levels to be effective. Anti-oppressive action at the personal level is likely to be easier to achieve than action at a wider cultural or structural level. Many strategies for anti-oppressive practice have concentrated on the personal level, as indeed does much of this book. However, some writers have been very critical of this approach. For example, Ashrif says of the strategy of 'raising awareness':

Racism was divorced from structures and procedures and instead was confined to the white psyche. Race Awareness Training distorted the language and analyses of the Black movement such that racism was severed from its exploitative nature and rendered classless. Racism had been viewed as a psychological problem suffered by white people. (Ashrif, 2002)

## Concepts

Ashrif presents an alternative 'activist' approach, involving challenging power structures, oppressive institutions and gender and class inequalities.

We hope in this book to present some strategies for both a personal and a wider cultural and structural activist approach.

### **Summary**

- Discrimination relates primarily to unfairness, inequality and injustice.
- Oppression may go further and involve a low valuation of a person's worth that may put them in danger of rejection, harm or even death.
- There are many examples of oppression throughout history and throughout the world.
- Authentic accounts of people who have experienced or are at risk of oppression can engender respect and indicate components of effective anti-oppression.
- Positive thinking helps the development of anti-oppression.
- Oppression operates at different levels, so anti-oppression must too.